

WORLD WAR TWO TODAY

ROGER CREMERS



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IJMUIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS 2010

The Dutch armed forces were mobilized before the war. Here, a re-enactor from the 'Netherlands Prepared' organization at 'Fortress Island' at the mouth of the North Sea channel near IJmuiden.





DUNKIRK, FRANCE 2015

94-year-old James Baynes, Arthur Taylor and Michael Bentall, veterans of the British Expeditionary Force, reunited 75 years later on a Dunkirk beach. They were among the 338,000 Allied soldiers evacuated in Operation Dynamo (27 May - 4 June 1940), after British and French troops were surrounded by the German army during the Battle for France.





AUSCHWITZ, POLAND 2008

Two Hungarian sportsmen from the city of Komárom visit Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest German Nazi concentration and extermination camp in Poland. Here an estimated 1.1 million people were killed between 1940 and 1945.



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As a child, I played soldiers with my friends in the US Air Force barracks left over from the Second World War on the ‘Yankee 44’ airfield in Beek, Limburg. Playing at soldiers – as did so many of our contemporaries – probably sowed the seeds of my fascination with the Second World War. Since 2001, I have spent a lot of time in Central Europe, where the memories of the war seem much stronger than in Western Europe.

On a visit to Auschwitz in 2002, I saw an American tourist in one of the gas chambers wearing a t-shirt bearing the text: “Laugh! That’s an order!” I was surprised to see such a t-shirt being worn there, of all places. That got me thinking. Had the Second World War become a tourist attraction? In the years that followed, I visited commemorative events, forgotten places, archaeological digs, and monuments all over Europe.

In June 2012, I was at a ceremony in the market square in Carentan, France, and witnessed six veterans being welcomed and honoured as heroes. One of them, an American paratrooper Jack Womer, looked at the crowd gathered in the square and asked his daughter beside him, “What are all those people doing here?” The

people were grateful that he had fought for their freedom, but he had forgotten it all.

In August 2013, I was part of a search team in the middle of nowhere on the steppes of the Volgograd Oblast, in Russia. The group was looking for the remains of soldiers who had died during the Siege of Leningrad, in order for them to be given a decent burial. One digger, a teenager who wanted to join the armed forces, asked me if the Americans had also been involved in the liberation of Europe.

Sitting at the campfire that evening, I asked him why he was on the steppes digging up soldiers, while his fellow teenagers were enjoying a night out in the city. He answered with a quote from the eighteenth-century Russian general Alexander Suvorov, “The war is not over until the last soldier is buried.”

Nothing I have seen and heard over the past eight years has done anything to answer the question of whether the Second World War has become a tourist attraction. But the fact that the war has become a part of our popular culture is one of the reasons it has not been forgotten.

Roger Cremers

WHAT WE DIDN'T SEE

For the time being, historians still disagree about when WWII really ended, about whether it is actually over or whether it must still come to a definitive halt.

The suggestion has been made that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two Germanies constituted the true end of the Second World War. The 2006 soccer world cup in Germany could also be seen as a possible end, and in a column in the Dutch daily *De Volkskrant* I once wrote that the Greek crisis in the early summer of 2015 and the striking, self-confident performance by the German Minister of Finance, Schäubler, during that crisis marked the end of WWII. Momentarily, it seemed, there was no more German past to take into account, all shame and guilt had been banished.

But later that same summer, when Angela Merkel welcomed refugees to Germany, with striking hospitality and against the will of many members of her own party, that could not be seen outside the context of German history. The war, in other words, wasn't over yet.

It will be the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators, in any case, who determine when that war is truly over. Only when the shame and a certain reticence disappear definitively from official German discourse, and with that from European discourse, will we be able to note that World War II has become history.

The dichotomy between perpetrator and victim, certainly when it comes to WWII, has been questioned many times and in numerous ways¹, but the official German postwar identity is based precisely on the acceptance - with some hesitation, it's important to note that - of that dichotomy. The further the war itself retreats into the

past, the more eagerly Germany - and then more specifically the former Federal Republic; the way in which the former DDR copes with WWII is a very different story - has taken upon itself the wages of that guilt.

It would not be correct, however, to think that WWII lives on only in Germany. Anyone visiting Volgograd, formerly known as Stalingrad, cannot escape the impression that the heroic struggle against fascism was waged there only yesterday. Heroism has disappeared from the culture of remembrance in the Netherlands, to the extent that heroism was ever a part of it. That disappearance is due at least in part to writers like Vestdijk and Hermans debunking the myth of a people who, on the whole, waged brave resistance. In Russia, however, heroism is still alive and kicking.

Ironic then that in Roger Cremers' photograph of it, Yevgeni Vuchetich's statue of Mother Russia as memorial to the Battle of Stalingrad, a mother urging her children on to combat and resistance, looks so small, so insignificant. The statue itself, in fact, is gigantic. A comment perhaps on Russian heroism, that must needs be reduced to realistic proportions; the realistic proportions are ironic proportions.

The German culture of remembrance, which in the course of time has come to be defined largely by shame and an abstract sense of guilt (the war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht were swept under the carpet for a long time, and still are, to a certain extent - guilt, after all, always belongs to someone else), was perhaps symbolized best by the famous moment in 1970 when Willy Brandt fell to his knees before the monument commemorating the ghetto uprising in Warsaw and the ensuing destruction of that ghetto.

The Dutch culture of remembrance vacillates between shame, as seen in the speech held by Queen Beatrix

¹ The "Historikstreit" in Germany or, in the Netherlands, Chris van der Heijden's book *Grijs verleden* (Gray Past).

SEVASTOPOL, UKRAINE 2008

Tourists visiting the Sapun Ridge Diorama Museum, which houses a reconstruction of the strong German defence line to the south-east of Sevastopol city centre. The area was also the scene of heavy fighting during the Siege of Sevastopol (1941-42). Roger Fenton's classic photograph, 'Valley of the shadow of death' was taken in this countryside during the Crimean War (1853-56).





YSSELSTEYN, THE NETHERLANDS 2011

German schoolchildren cleaning tombstones in the German War Cemetery,
as part of the 'Work for Peace' movement.





FÜRSTENBERG, GERMANY 2012

Rocks laid by feminist and anti-fascist groups to mark the border of the former Uckermark concentration camp. Practically nothing remains of this camp for young girls. After liberation, it was destroyed to create a military base for the Soviet forces.





TEREŽÍN, CZECH REPUBLIC 2014

Ashes at the side of the road to the Jewish cemetery and crematorium, south of the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Terezin, an old Czech garrison city, was transformed into a ghetto, a transit and propaganda camp, and re-named Theresienstadt. 139,667 Jews were deported here between November 1942 and April 1945; from here, 88,000 Jews were sent to extermination camps; and 33,818 died in the city due to privation, disease, torture or execution.



QUIBERVILLE, FRANCE 2014

A bunker (type 622), part of the Atlantic Wall, fallen from the cliff onto the beach. The Atlantic Wall was the name given to massive coastal defences, built on Hitler's orders, which stretched all the way along the coastline from Norway to the Spanish border.



ULRICHSBERG, AUSTRIA 2012

The Ulrichsberg gathering, an annual reunion of veterans of the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS held at the Ulrichsberg mountain in Austria. The gatherings commemorate those who were killed in World War II in the 'decent fulfilment of their duties' as soldiers.



LEUSDEN, THE NETHERLANDS 2013

National Dutch Remembrance Day is the only day that members of the public are granted access to the execution site at Jannetjesdal, part of the military training ground of the Dutch army at Leusderheide. This occasion commemorates the almost 300 Dutch men who were killed here and buried in mass graves. Leusderheide was one of the main execution sites in The Netherlands during the war.







SAINT-MARIE-DU-MONT, FRANCE 2012

World War II - veteran sisters Dorothy Levitsky-Sinner (left) and Ellan Levitsky-Orkin (centre), together with former paratrooper Ray Fary (right), salute during the playing of the US national anthem, at the dedication of the Richard D. Winters Leadership Monument, 6 June 2012.



VOLGOGRAD, RUSSIA 2013

A Yakovlev Yak-3 fighter aircraft outside the Volgograd State Panoramic Museum. Inside the museum is an impression of the Battle of Stalingrad.



AUSCHWITZ, POLAND 2008

Participants in the March of the Living at the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum.
The March of the Living is an international educational programme that brings Jewish people from all over the world to Poland on Holocaust Memorial Day, to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau.



COLLEVILLE SUR MER, FRANCE 2014

On 7 June 2014, the day after the 70th Anniversary of D-Day, a boy plays with toy soldiers on Omaha beach just below the steps leading to the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial.





MERVILLE-FRANCEVILLE-PLAGE, FRANCE 2012

A re-enactor climbs out of an authentic Douglas C47 at the Musée de la Batterie de Merville. This type of plane took part in all the airborne missions of World War II.

BRAINTREE, UNITED KINGDOM 2015 →

Battle re-enactment at the Temple at War Living History Show.



LA MADELEINE, FRANCE 2012

A re-enactor dressed as an American World War II soldier, poses near Utah Beach Landing Museum.





The further away World War Two lies behind us, the more intensely it seems to be experienced.

Dutch documentary photographer Roger Cremers (b. 1972) has tried to answer what role its legacy still has in everyday life. For this book he explored the culture of remembrance by travelling through Europe for eight years, documenting places of commemoration, archaeological digs, events and monuments.

'The culture of remembrance makes tourists of us all, tragic tourists, because we are forced to remember things we have never seen,' states Dutch author Arnon Grunberg in his essay that accompanies the photographs.

A selection of Cremers' 2009 World Press Photo Award winning series about Auschwitz is included in this book.

